

Chapter Six -- Old 1700

Maybe it was because we were more benighted and needed them worse than anybody else, or maybe it was just luck.

Anyway, whatever the reason may have been, wherever the Swetnams went, somebody was always sending missionaries to us. While we were in Kentucky, of course, everybody looked on us as fair game. There's just something about a mountaineer that makes a parson's Bible finger itch, I guess. There's hardly a cove in Eastern Kentucky that hasn't had some kind of a missionary, or Bible woman, or church, or school, or settlement house, first or last.

We always found it sort of interesting in a way, for it gave us a chance to look nearly everything over. The Unitarians and Congregationalists and Episcopalians were always sending boxes of clothing and things to be given away, and there was always some kind of literature included, mostly religious.

People in the mountains took different sides on how we felt about those things. Some of the ones that needed clothes would take them; some would take anything anybody would give 'em and beg for more; and some that didn't need the stuff would take it rather than seem mean, figuring on givin' it away, or usin' it to keep the dogs warm in winter.

We needed the clothes pretty bad sometimes, but wouldn't touch them, for we were too proud to take any kind of charity, even if we starved. But we'd always take any kind of literature they gave out, to see what they had to say.

There were always Russellite and Mormon missionaries coming through, and they didn't give away anything, except sometimes a few tracts. They mostly sold them. We didn't buy any, and Mother wouldn't even let us read the ones they left in spite of her, but Dad would read anything. The Mormon missionaries were always young and nice-looking and good talkers, but you never could guess what the next Russellites would be like.

The Presbyterians had settlement houses and schools, but didn't keep them up very long, sometimes. One of the first schools I can remember Father's teaching was in a tremendous big brick house, which the Presbyterians had built for a sort of mission college, but it had gone dead, and was used for a public school, at West Liberty, Kentucky. I was too young to read, but they told me the letters over the door said it was the "Matthew T. Scott Junior Collegiate Institute." I never have been quite sure whether the "junior" went with the man's name or the school.

One time some ethical society sent a woman from over in South Dakota to Blainetown to lecture, back while Dad was gay and single. He had done some homesteading over in North Dakota, and squired her around all the time she was at Blaine. After she went back home, I'm told he got a letter from the woman's husband, thanking him for how nice he had been to his wife. I think the letter came as a shock to Dad, but he never would tell enough about the matter to let us find out who was the real loser in the game. I have my ideas, though, because her name was Rose something, and Mother never could stand the name Rose.

Even after we left Kentucky we were always landing where somebody seemed to think we needed missionaries. Once, I remember, some Boston outfit called the "Lend-A-Hand Society" sent us a box

of books. They were good books, too, and very good reading.

But never in all our experience did we meet the equal of Old 1700, the missionary to Georgia, from -- of all places -- over in Arkansas, somewhere.

We were living in a little town in North Georgia at the time, and thought we were right nearly civilized, even if we still observed Robert E. Lee's birthday, and hadn't learned to forgive Sherman's march through Georgia. Maybe he had to do it -- I suppose if he hadn't the South'd be fightin' yet -- but if you'd seen it from the side we did, you might spit on the ground when his name was mentioned, too. At least we were sorry Lincoln had been shot, and sympathized with Garfield and McKinley, too, for we figured it wasn't right to shoot 'em down like dogs, even if they were Republicans.

But to get back to Old 1700, I can't remember what his real name was, because that was all we ever called him. That wasn't because he looked like he'd been born in the year 1700, though he may have been, from his looks.

He didn't come in on foot, like the Mormon and Russellite missionaries, or in a wagon or a surrey, the way the ones from the East used to up in Kentucky. We weren't sure but what he might have dropped from the clouds, at first, though later the station agent said he got off the 6:11 train.

I think Guy Camp and I discovered Old 1700, when we were going up to the mail. Guy's father was the postmaster.

It was a frosty sort of morning early in 1918, and missionaries were the last thing on our minds when we saw him coming down the road.

Old 1700 was about five foot six, and was fat -- or as Guy said later, he looked like a little thin man that had swallowed a wash pot. But we didn't notice that at first for looking at the rest of him.

He was dressed in a black suit that might have been homespun, but was a good fit. He had a pretty good suitcase in one hand, and a violin case in the other, and the biggest Stetson hat I ever saw in my life, on his head.

But the thing that fascinated us was his hair and beard. He had a big, black beard that would have filled a gallon bucket, rammed down tight, and it wasn't rammed down. It covered all of his face but a pair of sharp blue eyes and a sort of knobby red nose and two bright red cheeks. But when you looked at him from the side, you could hardly have told which way was in front, for he was ~~so~~ bald the spot showed below his hat, and the hair below it hung down as far behind as his beard did in front. But the hair was getting gray.

Our eyes must have been popping, but as we came up he stopped in the path and asked us how to get to the hotel. He had a good voice, and spoke up as if he knew why he was there.

There wasn't any hotel, but we took him down to old Mrs. Kilgore's, because she had a room she would rent, and sometimes fed people that stayed there. One of her neighbors who didn't like the old lady was always threatening to get the law on her for keeping a tavern without a license. Mrs. Kilgore wouldn't get a license because it cost \$50, and she didn't make as much as that in a year. But she and her husband were nice old people, and their house was clean as a new pin, and nobody ever did anything about her not hav-

ing a license.

Guy and I took the man down there, and the next thing we knew was when he came down to school just before dinner time, and asked Dad if he could hold a meeting in the school that night. Dad was a firm believer in freedom of speech and freedom of religion, and never turned down anybody that wanted to do anything respectable, but he asked what church he belonged to.

"Suh," said Old 1700, "I am the founder and a missionary for the First Apostolic Baptist Church." Dad could hardly keep from laughing when he brought out some leaflets to show he was from Arkansas, for we'd lived for a while in West Tennessee, and always thought if there was any place in the world that needed missionaries it was Arkansas. But he said it would be all right.

One thing you can say for Georgia people. They'll give anybody his say, no matter what he's talking about. Old 1700 got a pretty good crowd that night, even if it was cold. There must have been thirty or forty of us young people who had seen him at school; and all our family, mostly in hopes of learning some new songs; and Guy's father and mother and a few other church leaders, who felt like it wasn't quite respectable to stay away from any kind of a meeting.

There was a piano in the school, but Old 1700 wouldn't let Shirley play it. He hauled out his fiddle, and played it and led the singing at the same time. I'll bet even Fritz Kreisler couldn't have done that.

First he tuned up his fiddle and at the same time gave us a lecture on it.

"Now, young people," he said, "if you want to learn to play

the violin, the first thing to do is to get you a good one, like this. Don't just get any old fiddle and think it will do. The fiddle is an instrument of the Devil, but the violin is a music instrument worthy to be offered to the Lord."

He tuned the fiddle like he knew his business, but when he started to play it, out came the wildest squawks I've ever heard. But he seemed to think it was wonderful.

He passed around some of his songbooks, which had about a hundred songs, and told us he had written every one of 'em. We didn't much believe him till we looked at the words, an' heard the music -- if you could call it that. It sounded like a sort of explosive yelp, or rather helps, one after the other.

I remember some were temperance songs, and one had the refrain:

I'll never get drunk again, no, no,
Nor in a barroom go.

The bass came in strong just on the last word, stretching out another "barroom go."

But the one I really remember was his song about Noah and the ark. Nobody will ever believe it, but the words began:

Original ark was made of gopher wood, of gopher wood.
'Twas pitched within, without, and rain it stood, and
rain it stood.

It was the proper height, the proper height, the proper
height, just forty-five, just forty-five.

One sanitary window helped survive; they did survive.

I forget where the words went from there on, but they were all about Noah and the ark, and how he planted a vineyard and got drunk and cussed his sons for making fun of him; which is all from the Bible. If you don't believe it, go read Genesis, though the last few chapters of Judges are much more interesting. If I printed 'em here the book might get banned in Boston.

Anyway, he preached quite a sermon, everything from the evils of alcohol to dancing, and told us when David said in the Psalms to praise the Lord with the dance, he meant a little musical instrument that looked kind of like a flute.

He took up a collection that might have come to a dollar, and offered to sell his song books for a quarter. Father was the only one who bought a copy, and he gave the old man a dollar.

Next day there was a rumor running around that maybe the man was a German spy, and that he had been run out of Bremen the day before he landed in Whitesburg. Some of the men were for lynching him, but Father talked to them, and tried to get Old 1700 to leave town for his own good.

Old 1700 wouldn't go. He said he was willing to be a martyr for the cause of the Lord, and he announced another meetin' for that night.

Nobody tried to lynch him, an' nobody came out but Father and a bunch of the young people, mostly shirt-tail boys. Nobody tried to argue with him, but something happened that night that made him head on south on the 6:11 train next morning.

The railroad had a deep cut through hills at each edge of town, and they had out on some heavy engines of the 1700 class to haul freight. Those engines had the wildest whistles I've ever

heard.

The old man had finished his sermon and lifted up his voice to sing a solo, that night, when something went wrong and he sounded about like a circle saw getting close to the end of a splintery log. I think it was Thee Kilgore that sent a stage whisper across the row of boys:

"Listen, boys," he said. "Old 1700, comin' through the cut."

Theo wasn't the sort that generally made jokes, and we'd all been brought up to keep order in church; but laughter swept over us like a wave. We didn't get our faces straight from then till the benediction.

We never saw or heard anything more of old 1700 again. But I've often wished we'd saved that song book. I'd like to see if I could learn to sing that ark song.